

A photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone up to take a picture of a small, patterned object on a table. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The person's arms and hands are visible, and the background shows a table and some other objects, though they are out of focus.

# Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe

edited by Leif Kramp, Nico Carpentier,  
Andreas Hepp, Ilija Tomanić Trivundža,  
Hannu Nieminen, Risto Kunelius,  
Tobias Olsson, Ebba Sundin  
and Richard Kilborn

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# Academic Schizophrenia: Communication Scholars and the Double Bind<sup>1</sup>

*François Heinderyckx*

The academic world is under tremendous and unprecedented pressure world-wide. The economic downturn, and the austerity imposed on public finances have forced higher education into logics of efficiency from which they used to be preserved. The academic world had to be somewhat protected from the vagaries of social, political and economic trends. Not anymore. What's more, with endemic unemployment reaching worrying highs in many Western countries, the education system is blatantly accused of being largely responsible for the discrepancy between the qualifications of the labour force and the requirements of the labour market. In short, academic institutions are supposed to improve, but their performance in doing that is measured both in financial efficiency and in employability of graduating students.

Being under pressure is not problematic as such. Pressure can stimulate creativity, structural improvements and gains in efficiency. Pressure can be the institutional equivalent of the “positive stress” that drives us to give the best of ourselves, to think outside the box, to venture outside our comfort zone, to challenge and rejuvenate some of our certitudes.

## 1. Conflicting expectations

The pressure we face now could also be prejudicial and destructive, however. The undermining nature of the pressure that we face also lies in its multi-dimensional and, to a large extent, contradictory nature. The contradictions stem from the fact that academic institutions, in the dominant traditional model, are expected to take on three distinct core missions: to teach, to research, and to serve the community (“public service”). The very nature of each of these three fundamental duties has gradually morphed under the influence of a changing context which led to changing expectations: new expectations from the students (and their parents), new expectations from the labour market, and new expectations from the public authorities. Let us consider some of these changing expectations.

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Students and the labour market expect higher education to provide curricula that are tailor made and continuously adjusted so as to supply graduates with the skills and the knowledge that are needed or at least appreciated and valued among their future employers. The labour market and the public authorities also expect that academia will provide the knowledge, expertise, innovations and data to help businesses thrive and public institutions be more efficient, including in regulation and policymaking. Students and their parents expect equal access to higher education for all, just as they expect that schools and universities will do what it takes for them to succeed: employment-suited education for all, and no one left behind.

Each of these expectations is perfectly legitimate, but with the combination of these plural requirements in a context where academic institutions are furthermore expected, by society at large, to guide and provide bearings as to what is safe, what is socially acceptable and what is moral, the academic community finds itself facing conflicting injunctions. These conflicting injunctions, hovering over academic institutions, are predominantly weighing on the shoulders of the foot soldiers of academia, i.e. professors, assistants and staff alike. The scholars are on all those fronts simultaneously, and because the aims imposed on us are largely contradictory, we are led into an intriguing case of what we will call, for the purpose of this argument, “academic schizophrenia”.

In most countries, academic institutions are also swept along by the new public management, forcing a rapid transition towards a culture of efficiency and auditing that clashes with the academic culture traditionally based on academic freedom, evaluation by peers and a slow pace of knowledge building. The audit culture has, with the best of intentions, imposed a change in pace. Not that scholars were too slow, but we now have to establish and to give material evidence, at short intervals, that we are productive, that we are worth the investment, that we deliver quality output, that we are present in the academic public sphere in a significant way. To make the evaluation process transparently “objective”, indicators and measurements are developed that, at least for our fields, are completely inappropriate, inadequate, even inept. To give but one example, these measurements rely almost exclusively on publication in academic journals, while one of the most prestigious and academically significant achievements in our field is to publish a book. Even in natural sciences, the metrics of evaluation are being challenged. The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, initially launched by the American Society for Cell Biology, offers 18 recommendations, such as not using “journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, as a surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles to assess an individual scientist’s contributions, in hiring, promotion, or funding decisions” (DORA, 2012). But in failing to offer an alternative mode of evaluation, we have been condemned to accept publication in journals, impact factors and other falsely reassuring bibliometric indicators.

The injunction to shift into short cycles of knowledge production (or at least its materialisation) has forced scholars to adapt the way they do research, not to be more efficient, but to score more highly on the new scales of academic efficiency, to best fit the model of academic excellence. Better to write three small articles than wait until a really significant book can be published.

The pressure that we feel could therefore deprive us of a fundamental resource of the academic ecosystem which is too often confused with inertia and inefficiency, namely time: time to observe, to challenge, to contemplate, to understand; time to process and settle the fuss, the buzz and the hype; time to make sense and create knowledge; time to reflect on all that through teaching and the various channels of dissemination. We have been forced into a culture of “fast science” that is damaging to some of the fundamentals of sound science. A number of initiatives are being taken by scholars to rebel against this inclination. One remarkable initiative is the “Slow Science Manifesto” which was launched in 2010 in Europe:

Science needs time to think. Science needs time to read, and time to fail. Science does not always know what it might be at right now. Science develops unsteadily, with jerky moves and unpredictable leaps forward—at the same time, however, it creeps about on a very slow time scale, for which there must be room and to which justice must be done. Slow science was pretty much the only science conceivable for hundreds of years; today, we argue, it deserves revival and needs protection. Society should give scientists the time they need, but more importantly, scientists must take their time. (The Slow Science Academy, 2010)

## 2. Communication science

Let us examine the situation more specifically in the area of media and communication science, which is among the fields where the situation is further complicated by two factors. First, interdisciplinarity. Our academic life is made more complex by the fact that research in media and communication is often necessarily interdisciplinary. We are working at a disciplinary crossroads, an academic hub where sociology rubs shoulders with psychology, history, linguistics, law, political science, economics, philosophy, informatics, and much more. Interdisciplinarity is so fundamentally associated with communication research that some argue that communication is not a discipline, not even in the making, and should never become one, for its vibrancy and creativity stem from its capacity to combine contributions from any number of existing disciplines in innovative ways.

I once introduced the distinction, among communication scholars, between “communication natives” and “communication migrants” (Heinderyckx, 2007). Communication natives have studied in a communication science curriculum and, in some cases, have earned a PhD in communication science. Communication migrants have studied in another established discipline and



have come to work on subjects that fall within the remit of communication, and as a result see themselves as communication scholars. Obvious markers of such a bond and self-affiliation are to be found in membership of learned societies and contributions to conferences or publications with explicit reference to media and communication. A scholar trained as a political scientist but who is a member of any academic communication association, who regularly attends communication conferences and publishes in communication journals would be a typical communication migrant.

The interdisciplinary nature of communication scholarship is also very visible in the range of sources used. In a survey conducted among members of ICA, IAMCR and ECREA a couple of years ago, we asked what journals people used most for their research and their teaching. After de-duplication, it appeared that 20 journals were particularly popular, with another 120 mentioned often, and a long tail of hundreds of journals in many disciplines used by smaller numbers of respondents.

Within universities, funding agencies and publishers, media and communication science may be everywhere, but also too often nowhere significantly. Communication may be central, yet it is scattered. Communication science may be pioneering, but largely off the radar of the institutions that organise science.

A second factor that complicates things further is related to the radical changes affecting the very objects that we study, if only in the context of the advent of the Information Society and information and communication technologies. Studying communication today is to aim at blurred and moving targets. Many scholars active in the area of media and communication have to face both the change in institutional culture and the transformation of their objects and methods. We are swept along by the new academic management culture while already being rocked by the swift evolution of communication practices and communication science.

Public authorities, the industry, and civil society are all in need of guidance, all the more so as the magnitude and pace of these changes increase. Media effects, media regulation, intellectual property, media literacy, information overload, privacy, transparency, e-health, e-business, e-democracy, e-everything are just a few of the burning societal issues that fall within the scope of media and communication science. With social relevance and urgency come legitimacy, but also yet more pressure that further stretches these conflicting injunctions that tear us apart. Let us examine a few concrete examples.

### 3. Teaching influence and lobbying

Let us consider the specific domain of lobbying and influence. My department recently launched a programme in political communication within a Master's degree in communication. The programme explicitly pays significant attention to lobbying (I am based in Brussels, known as one of the major strongholds of advocacy and lobbying in the world). This has proved to be a rather difficult domain to take on from an academic institution. As of today, lobbying is still looked at with great suspicion in Europe. It is associated with manipulation, covert operations, serving the interests of the powerful elite at the expense of the general interest. Lobbyists are the dark knights of policy making and they are often described as responsible for slowing down, toning down or even shutting down a number of policy and regulation initiatives at all levels.

When we announced the new programme the question was asked: what exactly is your proposition? What will students be offered? Will they be trained to become skilled lobbyists? Or is the programme concerned with influence studies, trying to debunk lobbying, to deconstruct the process and to understand the actors, the practices and the issues? The answer to this question should ideally be "both", given that the educational model of universities and other academic institutions is precisely the combination of teaching and research, in such a way that one feeds the other. Not only are many teachers also researchers, but students are brought up in the hope that they will develop a capacity to critically understand the objects, practices and ideas with which they are confronted. They are to acquire skills, along with the intellectual and moral capacity to use those skills in a responsible and ethical manner.

Having to combine both aims can easily lead to a rather uncomfortable cognitive or moral position, however. The university offers access to knowledge, skills and experience that could be used to influence or even manipulate public opinion and policymaking. Psychology, social-psychology, rhetoric, and legal engineering, to name but a few, abound in theories and various empirical works that go far into understanding the processes by which individuals and groups can see their opinions, perceptions, attitudes and behaviours affected, or not. In theory, we could assemble a body of knowledge and expertise to teach our students to become the ultimate manipulators - and I have no doubt that employers would squabble to hire such students before they even graduate.

Because our actions are guided by moral principles, and because we are, to some extent, the guardians and keepers of those moral principles, we would obviously never contemplate doing anything like that. At the same time, the labour market in Brussels and other capitals craves skilled employees with a background that will make them operational and efficient in the business of lobbying and influence making. As part of our responsibility toward society, we are expected to respond to such a demand. By doing so, we contribute to

supply businesses and institutions that are a legitimate part of society, and we equip our students with the skills and knowledge that will make them more likely to find a job and to perform well within these businesses and institutions. In an increasingly competitive higher education landscape, the pressure to give into these demands increases dramatically, particularly in times of economic and labour crisis, when even public authorities require education to close the maddening skills gap that leaves so many jobs unfilled, while record numbers of people are desperately seeking employment.

Meanwhile, because we are scholars, because we conduct research within the remit of the topics that we teach, we are to remain on our guards, to keep a critical eye on our objects of study and to maintain a certain level of curiosity while conducting investigative research. Our research might lead us to findings and observations that incur disapproval or even the exposure of dubious practices, actions or specific actors. Are we completely unconstrained about doing this while we try to build up a bond of trust with the industry? Can we credibly prepare students to blend in with the practices of an industry when we teach and simultaneously address those same practices critically while we do research? Can we train dark knights and incarnate white knights at the same time?

More contradiction arises when considering our wider responsibilities towards society and the public authorities. Again, we are to do our best to provide students with an education that will lead them to quality jobs and a promising career; we are to offer the skilled workers sought by the labour market; but we are also the watchdogs of social practices and as such we are to identify, document and deconstruct phenomena that we think are significant and in some cases to argue against them.

These tensions are further aggravated when we are involved in some official council or assembly, some study group or panel, as academic experts, as consultants for industry or as service providers for some contractual research. Moral ethical principles will guide us in managing these different roles forcing us in opposite corners of the same issues. In some cases, we must work acrobatically to avoid conflicts of interest. In many cases, opponents can easily flag a lack of independence in experts if they were once engaged in projects involving a stakeholder, which is almost inevitable for an expert with any significant reputation.

#### 4. Teaching journalism

Let us consider the case of schools of journalism. In many countries, the best or sometimes the only schools of journalism are run within universities. They provide a perfect example of how the many expectations of society can lead to contradictions, discomfort and paradoxical injunctions.

Schools of journalism spare no effort to invest in equipment, hire staff and tweak their curriculum so that students are trained in the latest trendy techniques and technologies, so that they will fit in, and blend into the newsroom when they undertake their internship and, hopefully when they find a job after graduation. This is perfectly legitimate and meets the expectations of the students and their parents, of the labour market and the public authorities. Meanwhile, the same scholars spending the day sticking to the latest trends to match the evolution in news production and satisfy the expectations of news organizations, these same scholars, when they come home at night and finally find a little spare time to do their own research, will most likely morph into sassy observers, investigating and coming up with findings and thoughts possibly very critical of the same news organizations. Dr Jekyll teaches journalism students during the day; the hideous Mr Hyde criticises the trends and practices of contemporary journalism and news media at night. Or maybe it's the other way around: Dr Jekyll at night, uncompromising when deconstructing and questioning the news industry, morphing into the hideous Mr Hyde training journalists to measure up for the expectations of the news organizations. We are training hunters and promoting wildlife preservation at the same time. We are training fast-food restaurant employees and writing health-food treatises and sophisticated cookbooks at the same time. We are training students for an industry subject to our criticism.

The question thus becomes: are we training the journalists to match our dreams or those of the news industry? It would be simplistic to think that academics defend a utopian model of journalism while professionals are promoting a more grounded, realistic vision. More often than not, the scholar is on the well-grounded side, while the news industry, always in search of innovation and the next big trend, may speculate on and cherish their own utopia. Sometimes, scholars simply feel they should protect the industry against itself. In many cases, fortunately, there is no antagonism, and the views of the industry are largely shared within academic circles. But it is essential that there remains room and legitimacy for a critical analysis of, and discourse about, the news industry.

A survey conducted in the US by the Poynter News University shows how views can diverge between journalism educators and journalism professionals. For example, 75% of educators believe that a journalism degree is extremely important in order to understand the values of journalism. Only 28% of professionals share that view (Poynter, 2013: 1). Both sides converge in thinking that journalism education mostly keeps up with industry changes (46% vs. 43%). The report states that "journalism education can remain relevant only if it takes the lead in anticipating the skills that will be needed and ensuring that students learn these skills" (Poynter, 2013: 7). Another study was conducted in Flanders (Belgium) to compare the expectations of media professionals and the curricula of the schools of journalism. The study found that schools insisted greatly on

news production and traineeships while the profession felt that news gathering skills should be more of a priority, along with ethics, general knowledge, command of language and multilingualism (Opgenhaffen et al., 2013: 139-140).

This is not only true in initial, but also in continuing education. Journalism schools are often asked by the industry to organise refresher courses for their staff so as to better prepare them for the next change, for the next evolution of their trade, irrespective of our best judgement (let alone our opinion) about those evolutions. We may at times serve and enhance in our teaching practices that we denounce or deplore in our writings. If we push such reasoning to the point of absurdity, with the tabloidisation of the press, should we train our students in long-range telephoto and camouflage techniques or in the hacking of phones? No one would even contemplate such folly because these practices clash with the principles that we stand for, be they moral or legal. But our judgment call might not always be so assured. In many cases, when we know what will be expected of our students on the job, we must warn them, make them conscious of the issues and the implications of certain trends and practices, then we must do what we can so that they will be capable of doing it in a way that lessens the problems and issues as much as possible. Moreover, we must do this in a way that prepares them for the inevitable further changes that will affect the news industry within their lifetime. This can only be done by developing a constructive but vigilant critical attitude towards the trade of journalism and news media, based on a sound understanding of the history, the laws, the ethics and the requirements of journalism and news media.

Whatever their efforts, communication scholars are caught in a web of conflicting injunctions, of opposing forces that cannot always be dealt with by compromising on a middle ground. The resulting tension is reminiscent of the notion of ‘double bind’ developed by Gregory Bateson within the context of theorising schizophrenia, on the basis of communications theory, ironically. The double bind is described (Bateson et al., 1956) as “a situation in which no matter what a person does, he ‘can’t win.’ It is hypothesized that a person caught in the double bind may develop schizophrenic symptoms.” In other words, having to reconcile two sets of conflicting constraints might lead us to develop a double personality: one, an educator trying hard to keep pace with the evolutions and expectations of the labour market; the other, a principled academic critically questioning these same evolutions and trying to incarnate the keeper of values and models that might be threatened by these same trends.

Academic institutions, because they employ scholars who are expected to achieve in teaching, in research and in service to the community, are best suited to impregnate their curricula and publications with bearings, values and principles (moral and otherwise) that will coat the professional skills of their students with an ethical and humanistic varnish while voicing their views in

the public sphere. This is easier said than done. Yet, we have no choice but to come to terms with our academic schizophrenia because it is a fundamental duty to ourselves, to our students and to society.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on an address delivered at the 2nd Media Governance Roundtable, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi, India, on 25 Feb. 2013.

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## Biography

François Heinderyckx (PhD) is Professor at Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) where he teaches media sociology and political communication. He is the former president of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA, 2005-2012) and the President of the International Communication Association (ICA, 2013-2014). His research interests include journalism, news media, media audiences, election campaigns and media literacy.

Contact: [francois.heinderyckx@ulb.ac.be](mailto:francois.heinderyckx@ulb.ac.be)